



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

Located in the heart of central Asia, the landlocked Kyrgyz Republic covers 77,202 square miles (199,951 square kilometers) and is similar in size to South Dakota. The terrain is mostly mountainous; 40 percent of Kyrgyzstan is above 9,900 feet (3,000 meters). Pobeda (“Victory Peak”) is one of the world’s highest mountains, at 24,549 feet (7,439 meters). Glaciers are found at high elevations. The largest is Inyl’chek (350 square miles, or 907 square kilometers), on the Khan-Tengri Massif. Melting mountain ice and snow feed streams, rivers, mineral springs, and more than two thousand lakes. The largest lake, Issyk-Kul, is one of the world’s largest alpine lakes. Earthquakes are infrequent but strong.

Kyrgyzstan’s picturesque mountains and alpine meadows open to grassland steppes, then to broad-leafed and conifer forests and foothills. Semiarid and arid deserts and river valleys rim the south of Kyrgyzstan, particularly the Ferghana and Chuiskaya valleys, at 1,600 feet (488 meters) above sea level. Kyrgyzstan has a wide variety of native flora and fauna, including the rare snow leopard, 25 species of reptiles, nearly 400 species of birds, and 4,500 species of plants.

The climate varies widely by region, but Kyrgyzstan generally has a dry continental climate with four seasons. Summers are hot and dry. On average, sunny weather can be expected 247 days per year. In the inhabited lowland valleys, average summer temperatures might rise to 86°F (30°C) but can reach 95°F (35°C) in western Kyrgyzstan. Winters are cold and snowy, with temperatures often below freezing.

### History

Oral legends are integrated into the history of early Kyrgyz culture. For example, a traditional explanation of the origin of the word *Kyrgyz* is explained thus: 40 girls (*kyrk* is “forty”; *kyz* is “girls”), magically and simultaneously impregnated by one wandering man, became the mothers of 40 sons. Each son founded one of the original 40 nomadic tribes.

Territorial divisions of central Asian nomads were blurred by invasions and migration, as well as Turkic, Mongol, and Persian cultural influences. The Chinese recorded evidence of the Kyrgyz nation in about 2000 BC. Various records indicate that the city of Osh was established in 13 BC. The first Kyrgyz language was developed around this time.

The Kyrgyz were one of the most powerful nomad tribes to persistently attack China, perhaps precipitating the building of China’s Great Wall. Sunni Islam, adopted under the Karakhanid *Kaganat* (Kingdom), helped unify the various tribal and ethnic groups. In the 10th century, the Great Kyrgyz *Kaganat* developed and expanded because of its military prowess and ideal location on the Great Silk Road trade route.

However, in the 13th century, the last Kyrgyz *Kaganat* fell to Genghis Khan’s Mongol onslaughts. By the 18th century, the Kyrgyz were continually being attacked by other invaders. Russian forces responded to Kyrgyz appeals for help by occupying northern Kyrgyzstan in 1876. At the same time, other ethnic groups began migrating to the area.

Russian protection soon became domination. The Kyrgyz language was reestablished (written in Cyrillic), roads were built, schools were opened, and new industries were organized, but the Kyrgyz were dissatisfied with czarist rule.

Russian troops suppressed a 1916 revolt. Famine ensued, and more than half a million Kyrgyz died; many others fled to China. Moscow claimed the area as the Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous Region in 1924. In 1936, the Kirgizia Soviet Socialist Republic became part of the Soviet Union. Sporadic rebellions continued as Stalin's forced collectivization and destruction of animal herds led to increased starvation. Forced to integrate into the Soviet system, the Kyrgyz people eventually acquiesced to much of the culture, as evidenced in urban architecture and many social customs. Yet the nomadic spirit remained strong, and some native traditions were revived after the fall of the Soviet Union.

When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, Kyrgyzstan became an independent republic. Its intended transition to democracy and a free-market economy has been difficult and slow. The nation's first president, Askar Akayev, won three successive elections amid allegations of corruption and the suppression of dissent. In February 2005, independent and opposition candidates were barred from running in parliamentary elections, sparking demonstrations. Protestors demanded new elections and Akayev's resignation. When they took over government buildings, Akayev fled the country. A new president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, was elected in 2005 and was subsequently pressured by protestors into making constitutional reforms. His party dominated elections in December 2007. In 2008, a major earthquake hit the southern province of Osh. Bakiyev's reforms led to the resignation of Prime Minister Marat Kadyraliyet and his government in 2009. The next year, opposition protests led Bakiyev to resign and flee to Belarus. Former foreign minister Roza Otunbayeva became the interim president. This provisional government was unable to control the June 2010 ethnic violence between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities of Osh; rioting killed hundreds and displaced thousands of people.

## THE PEOPLE

### Population

Kyrgyzstan's population of roughly 5.5 million is growing by about 1.4 percent annually. While 36 percent of the people live in cities, the rural population has grown since independence. The mountains are largely uninhabited, but about 40,000 Kyrgyz are seasonal nomads. The capital, Bishkek, has fewer than one million residents. Ethnic Kyrgyz comprise 65 percent of the total population. Other groups include Uzbeks (14 percent) in the south and Russians (13 percent) in the north. Armenians, Belarusians, Chinese, Kazakhs, Germans, Tajiks, Ukrainians, Uighurs, and others also live in the country. Tensions exist between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, as well as between residents of the Russian-oriented north and the more traditional south.

### Language

The nation's official languages are Kyrgyz and Russian. Russian was given national status in 2000 to persuade ethnic Russians to stop emigrating. Major northern and southern dialects are joined by several small regional dialects. Kyrgyz

is a Turkic language related to Turkish, Kazakh, Uzbek, Azeri, and Turkmen. Kyrgyz has been developed, extinguished, and reestablished many times. In 1924, it was based on the Arabic alphabet and incorporated Kyrgyz vocalizations; in 1928, the Latin script was substituted; and in 1941, Cyrillic symbols were adopted by all Turkic-speaking republics in the Soviet Union. Kyrgyz can be transliterated with the Latin alphabet. Today, both the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets are used in Kyrgyz writing. Russian is the primary language for business in urban areas.

### Religion

The Kyrgyz are traditionally Islamic; 75 percent of the population practices at least some Sunni Muslim traditions. However, many parts of Kyrgyz society are fairly secular. Islam's influence is heavier in the south, but Muslim traditions have been modified by other religious and native influences. The Russian Orthodox Church, various other Christian denominations, and Judaism have small followings.

Ancient beliefs are often mixed with formal religion. For example, tradition holds that a horse carries the spirit of the dead from the Middle World to the Upper World. For this reason, a horse is sacrificed and served at the funeral gathering for a respected deceased elder. Totemism (tribal affiliation or kinship with a particular animal) is also widely observed. Worshiped totems include the reindeer, white camel, snake, eagle-owl, and bear. Celestial symbols (moon, stars, and heaven) are other important elements in Kyrgyz religious beliefs. Shamanism, black and white magic, and a belief in *arback* (living ancestral spirits) are strong even among secular families.

### General Attitudes

Kyrgyz people are friendly, tolerant, soft-spoken, respectful of elders, and exceptionally hospitable. They are very proud of their nomadic heritage. Social, political, and business networks are structured along extended family lines; each family or clan provides support. Society is community oriented, so privacy and personal space are limited.

People are more important than schedules, and activities are more important than how quickly they can be accomplished. Hence, people have a flexible understanding of time. However, Western notions of the relative value of time are becoming more popular among a new generation of students, bankers, and merchants.

### Personal Appearance

Clothing is kept clean, mended, and ironed. There is an increasing contrast between traditional Kyrgyz dress and more modern fashions. For example, Kyrgyz women traditionally have waist-length hair often worn in a braid, but now many women cut their hair. Women in southern and rural areas might wear colorful silk dresses and headscarves. Northern and urban Kyrgyz women wear Western-style clothing, though headscarves are becoming more popular in cities. On cold winter days, older women might wear a Russian *shapka* or *tumak* (fur hat). Regardless of the style, clothing for most women is modest; skirts cover the knees, and sleeves cover the arms. Still, younger urban women wear

jeans, shorts, and miniskirts. Women prefer silver jewelry to gold because silver is considered a color closer to white, and white brings good luck. Silver also protects against misfortune.

Traditional costumes are embroidered in nature motifs such as ram horns and floral patterns. White, ruffled, bell-sleeved blouses and long, full skirts are covered by velvet aprons and close-fitting vests. A special hat might be added to the costume for certain celebrations. Although men wear Western-style clothing, they may include the traditional white wool pointed hat (*kalpak*) for protection against the elements and as a sign of patriotism. A *kalpak* worn by an adult has a folded-up velvet black, white, or brown brim; a boy's brim is green or blue. The white surface is embroidered with nature motifs. Each *kalpak* has a tassel at its peak; the peak represents the mountains. A man does not buy a *kalpak* for himself but receives it as a gift; the higher the hat's peak, the more honored the recipient. In winter, men might wear a *tumak*. Elderly men have beards, but younger men rarely do. According to tradition, a son cannot have a beard if his father is alive. White beards are a symbol of wisdom and honor.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

### Greetings

The standard Kyrgyz greeting is *Salamatsyzby* (Hello). Adult men might use the Islamic greeting *Al-Salām 'alaykum* (Peace be upon you). Russians greet with *Zdravstvuyte* (Hello) or the more informal *Privyet* (Hi). Men often shake hands. Traditionally, a Kyrgyz woman bows to older men, especially her husband's relatives. Older women greet children with kisses or a handshake. These customs are most prevalent in villages. When addressing an older person in Russian, one uses the first name plus a patronymic (father's first name with the suffix *-ovich* for a son or *-ovna* for a daughter). In Kyrgyz, a person is greeted by his or her father's first name, followed by *uulu* (son) or *kzy* (daughter) and the person's own given name: *Kadyrbek uulu Ulan* (Kadyrbek's son, Ulan). In addition, Kyrgyz address people older than themselves with the titles *eje* (older sister) and *agai* or *baike* (both mean "older brother"). The title comes at the end: *Gulsara Eje*. Young people address each other by given name.

### Gestures

The Kyrgyz are modest in their gesturing. Pointing with the finger is impolite; one indicates direction with the entire hand. Public displays of affection are considered impolite. At the end of a meal, Muslims might bring the hands together in a "prayer" position in front of the chest, then raise them together to trace an invisible circle, and return them to face level while saying *Omen*.

### Visiting

Visiting is the center of Kyrgyz social life. Guests remove their shoes upon entering a home and put on a visitor's pair of *tapochki* (slippers). It is common for guests to take a gift of candy, cake, flowers, or liquor. The most honored individual in a group is seated farthest from, but facing, the entrance.

Food symbolizes hospitality, so hosts always serve refreshments. This may include several rounds of tea in *chyny* (bowls). To indicate one is finished, one covers the empty bowl with the hand. Usually, bread or *borsok* (fried dough) is also served. It is impolite for a host not to offer and for a guest not to accept at least a little bread. When departing, a Kyrgyz might say *Kosh bogula* (Good-bye) and *Rakhmat* (Thank you). Hosts might also say *Jakshi baringiz* (Go well) and be told *Jakshi kalingiz* (Stay well).

### Eating

Kyrgyz families eat three meals a day together as schedules allow. Breakfast consists of black tea with sugar, and honey or *varaynya* (preserves) on buttered bread. The main meal of the day, usually dinner, is a hot meal traditionally consisting of meat, rice or noodles, bread, and vegetables. Every meal begins and ends with several cups of tea (*chai*).

In urban areas and in wealthy villagers' homes, people eat at a table in a dining room. Most rural diners sit on a *tushuk* (velvet floor mat) or low stools around a low table or a cloth. They eat from a common plate in the center of the table. Each person may have a small individual plate on which to place food. When guests are present, the hostess may place food on their plates. Guests who do not eat heartily can offend the hosts. Villagers often eat *kygyzcha* style (without utensils). Prior to the meal, the hostess pours warm water over guests' hands and into a bowl; they dry their hands on a provided towel. The host or special guest sits at the head of the table facing the door. Any other guests sit close to this position, and the hostess sits near the kitchen. Women sit with legs tucked to the side or folded under, covered by a skirt.

When a sheep is slaughtered for a meal or party (*toi*), it is customary for honored guests to eat the head. Each part of the head may have different symbolic significance. For example, a child may receive the ears to "listen" to his or her parents, or the most honored guest may receive the eye so that he may soon "see" the host. Drinking and toasting (with the right hand only) are part of most meals.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

The extended family has great importance in Kyrgyz culture, and several generations may live together in one household. This is less true in urban areas, where nuclear family households are common. The youngest son is responsible for the welfare of his aging parents. When he marries, he and his new bride live with his parents for at least six months. During this time, the bride is instructed in cooking, cleaning, and hosting. Kyrgyz women are expected to raise children, maintain the house, and prepare for guests. However, more urban women are taking full-time jobs and assuming roles and habits traditionally reserved for men, such as driving and socializing in public. A Kyrgyz man is regarded as the financial provider and undisputed head of the family, especially in rural areas. Children must obey and respect adults, even strangers.

## Housing

The most common form of housing in urban areas is the Soviet-era apartment building. Apartments usually have three or four rooms and a balcony for storage and hanging laundry. Freestanding homes are typical in towns and rural areas. Individual homes often have separate structures such as a *banya* (bathhouse), a summer kitchen, and pens for chickens and livestock. Most homes have a garden; growing fruits, herbs, and vegetables is an essential part of subsistence for most families. Many people live in compounds in which extended family members also have houses. The home or compound is usually surrounded by a high fence or brick wall. Some Kyrgyz live in a *yurta* (a round nomadic tent) while tending their horses or sheep in summer pastures.

## Dating and Marriage

Young people meet at schools, bars, concerts, and family parties. Another meeting point is Lake Issyk-Kul. Dating prior to marriage is brief. Marriages were once arranged by parents. To solidify the agreement, the boy's parents would present earrings to the future bride and later give her parents a *kalym* (a large sum of money). Though technically illegal, a potential groom might kidnap an unwilling or unsuspecting bride. She is taken to the boy's home, and if his mother successfully places a scarf on her head, she is betrothed and has no voice in the decision. Today most urban people choose their own spouses, but kidnappings are still common in rural areas. Wedding customs include *kalym*, *kiyit* (the exchange of clothes between the relatives of the bride and groom), *sepo* (a dowry for the bride), and *opko chaboo* (a sheep sacrificed for the meal). During the civil ceremony, the groom's mother places a white scarf on the bride's head. A common village ritual is *kyz kuumai* (chasing the bride). The bride is provided the fastest horse and must try to outrace the groom. Tradition states that if she outraces him, she can "choose" not to marry him. However, couples today simply race for a kiss. If the groom catches the bride, he gets a kiss; if she wins, she can whip him with a horse crop.

## Life Cycle

A newborn is taken promptly from its mother at the hospital. For several days, the mother sees the baby only when it needs feeding, a practice meant to protect the newborn from germs. The father may invite his friends over to drink and celebrate the birth. A party is held when an *imam* (Muslim leader) circumcises a boy, usually between the ages of three and five. One is considered an adult at around age 16 to 18.

A Kyrgyz family sets up a *yurta* when a loved one dies. The body is placed inside, and the men pray while the women wail for the deceased. An *imam* reads from the *Qur'an* before the men carry the body to the cemetery for burial. Family and friends are then invited to the home for a meal. Instead of killing a sheep (the tradition at most special occasions), the family kills a horse (the traditional funeral food) if it can afford one. Forty days after the death, the family invites guests again to grieve. The one-year anniversary is similarly observed. People visit the graves of deceased loved ones at least once a year. Kyrgyz tie scraps of cloth to trees or metal gates near cemeteries to symbolize a prayer said for the dead.

## Diet

The national Kyrgyz dish is *bishbarmak* (noodles and meat eaten with the fingers). Because of the expense in preparing this dish, it is usually reserved for special occasions. Common dishes include *plov* (rice with lamb, carrots, onions, and garlic) and *manty* (steamed meat and onions sealed in dough patties). Potatoes and rice are staples. People enjoy various breads, such as *byolko* (dark, long loaf) and *tahngdyr nahn* (flat bread). Desserts include bread with *varaynya* (preserves), cakes, chocolate, or cookies. Mutton is the meat of choice.

Seasonal produce includes tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots, cabbage, apples, grapes, and melons. Families preserve fresh produce for winter months. Nuts (especially walnuts) are readily available in the south. Kyrgyzstan has one of the world's largest natural walnut forests: Arslanbob. Legend has it that Alexander the Great planted the first walnut trees there.

Islamic tradition forbids pork and alcohol; most families abstain from pork but often not from alcohol. In fact, drinking alcohol is a common pastime. Black tea (green in the south), the most popular drink, is called "red tea" (*kyzyl chai*) and is always drunk hot with heavy doses of sweeteners. *Kumiss* (fermented mare's milk) is sold at roadside stands during the spring and summer.

## Recreation

The Kyrgyz enjoy outdoor activities. They spend time on Lake Issyk-Kul and hike or picnic in the mountains. Urban families might have *dachas* (mountain cottages) or go to health spas. Men fish and hunt. Older men play chess in parks. Soccer, wrestling, and basketball are popular sports. Traditional equestrian sports include *Ulak* (a type of polo played with a goat carcass), *Aht Chabysh* (long-distance races), *Dzhorgosalysh* (pacers' races, popular for betting), *Oodarysh* (wrestling on horseback), *Tyin Enmei* (falconry on horseback), and *Kyz Dzhyrysh* (girls' races). Children like *ordo*, a game played with sheep bones. Most people regularly watch television. Urban Kyrgyz gather to eat, drink, and talk.

## The Arts

Traditionally, Kyrgyz history has been transmitted via folk tales. Although there are many Kyrgyz epics, *Manas* is the longest (more than a million lines) and most significant. *Manas* was a folk hero said to represent the strength, independence, and unity of the Kyrgyz people. On special occasions, Kyrgyz gather in a *yurta* to hear lengthy passages of the epic recited by storytellers (*manaschis*). After being weakened during the Soviet era, the *Manas* tradition was revived in the 1990s.

Cultural institutions are limited mainly to urban centers. Bishkek residents enjoy ballet, drama, concerts, movies, the circus, art galleries, and historic museums. However, funding for cultural institutions has decreased dramatically since independence, and traditionally popular arts such as classical music have declined. Traditional music is played on the three-stringed *komuz* (small guitar-like instrument) and the *temir-komuz* or *oz-komus* (mouth harp).

## Holidays

Kyrgyzstan's public holidays include New Year's Day, International Women's Day (8 Mar.), International Workers' Day (1 May), Constitution Day (5 May), World War II Victory Day (9 May), and Independence Day (31 Aug.). Christian holidays include Christmas (7 Jan.) and Easter. *Nooruz* is the lunar New Year, celebrated on the first day of spring. Muslim holidays include *Orozo Ait* (Ramadan feast) and *Kurban Ait* (Day of Remembrance), both set by the lunar calendar.

## SOCIETY

### Government

Kyrgyzstan's president (currently Roza Otunbayeva) is head of state. The prime minister is head of government. The unicameral *Jogorku Kenesh* (Supreme Council) has 90 members, elected to five-year terms. The president is directly elected to a five-year term. The prime minister is nominated by the party that holds the majority of seats in the *Jogorku Kenesh*. The voting age is 18.

### Economy

Kyrgyzstan is making the difficult shift to a free-market economy. Restructuring is painful, but Kyrgyzstan has been relatively successful at lowering inflation, creating jobs, rebuilding roads, increasing industrial output, and privatizing some state-owned firms. Nevertheless, poverty and unemployment remain widespread. Private land ownership was legalized in 1999. Industry (manufacturing, mining, and electricity) is centered in the north, agriculture in the south. Primary cash crops include cotton and tobacco. Natural resources include gold, antimony, mercury, uranium, coal, and natural gas. The Kumtor goldfield is believed to be among the world's 10 largest goldfields. The currency is the *som* (KGS).

### Transportation and Communications

People prefer travel by private truck or car, but fuel is expensive and few people own cars. Most ride public buses in and between cities. North-south travel is difficult due to the terrain; some major roads, which are impassable in winter, are being rebuilt. Villagers continue to ride horses or use horse-drawn carts.

The internet is becoming widely available, even in rural areas. Cellular telephones are common, though rural people may only have access to public phones at post offices. There are several newspapers and radio stations in Kyrgyzstan. In addition to local television programming, broadcasts are received from neighboring countries.

### Education

Education is highly valued. Children attend primary and secondary schools between ages six and seventeen. Kindergartens are also available. Most children study hard and finish school. After secondary school, qualified students may attend college or technical school. Laws encourage training specialists to meet economic needs. In response,

many new higher education institutions are opening. Universities are found in major cities.

### Health

The free public healthcare network is poorly equipped, and the staff is underpaid. Families must often supply patient needs (medicine, food, supplies). Private hospitals and clinics provide better, but expensive, care. Alternative health care includes acupuncture, herbal medicines, and homeopathic treatments. Sauna baths, mineral waters, and thermal springs are considered therapeutic. Malnutrition still affects many children. Tuberculosis is a common health threat.

## AT A GLANCE

### Contact Information

Embassy of Kyrgyzstan, 2360 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 449-9822; web site [www.kgembassy.org](http://www.kgembassy.org).

### POPULATION & AREA

Population	5,508,626 (rank=110)
Area, sq. mi.	77,202 (rank=86)
Area, sq. km.	199,951

### DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	109 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	63 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$2,200
Adult literacy rate	99% (male); 98% (female)
Infant mortality rate	30 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	66 (male); 74 (female)

\*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

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